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ABSTRACT

A discussion of the relationship of second language course content and testing focuses on the instruction and assessment of language proficiency. Basic principles of measurement of proficiency and syllabus design for proficiency and their implications are examined. An approach is recommended to syllabus design that has the learner's real needs at its center, sets realistic goals in light of those needs, and identifies language content that will both satisfy those needs and lead to the desired proficiency levels. It is concluded that proficiency rating scales provide the most valid and reliable means of measuring practical proficiency and also contribute to the process of course design. (MSE)

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PROFICIENCY IN SYLLABUS DESIGN AND ASSESSMENT

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Proficiency in Syllabus Design
and Assessment

D.E. Ingram

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Preamble: Before starting my paper, let me say how delighted I was to receive your conference convener's invitation to address this conference. It is appropriate for me as national President of the Australian Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations to say how pleased the Federation and especially its Council and Executive have been in recent years to see closer ties developing between the AFMLTA and NZALT. We have also been delighted with the cooperation you have offered in connection with the 1988 World Congress to be held in Canberra. We thank you for all of that and my being here and the alacrity with which I accepted the invitation reflect our desire to see the ties between our two organizations strengthened. Since I am also the Regional Representative for S.E. Asia and the S.W. Pacific for the World Federation of Modern Language Teachers, the Fédération Internationale des Professeurs de Langues Vivantes, I would also like to convey to you the FIPLV's greetings.

I Introduction:

Let me outline, first, the parameters within which I have prepared my paper. At present, I understand that there are two major external examinations in New Zealand, at Third and Fifth Years, and that schools award the "Sixth Form Certificate" at the end of Fourth Year (it is no wonder New Zealanders confuse simple-minded Australians at cricket and rugby!). I also understand that the external examinations are norm-referenced, that consequently the Fourth Year examinations generally adopt similar approaches, but that there is considerable interest in moving towards criterion-referenced assessment except that there would seem to be some uncertainty about how to relate the

concepts of "attainment", which I take to mean "proficiency", and criterion-referencing to course design.

Consequently, this paper will consider some basic principles of assessment with particular attention to the measurement of proficiency, it will outline some principles of syllabus design by considering one practical approach to the identification of the language content of a syllabus where one regards proficiency as the ability to carry out language tasks or to use the language for practical purposes; and it will consider just some of the implications of different approaches to assessment for syllabus design.[1] (Later I also hope to be able to show a video on the measurement of proficiency and, in the workshop, to pose some key questions for discussion.)

II The Wider Scene:

Little of what this paper will say can be considered novel. The world trend towards the sort of position that will emerge initially became firmly established in the work of the Council of Europe. This started to appear more than ten years ago, it established the concept of functions and notions in language teaching, and its emphasis on language tasks led, in some places, to a focus on learners' practical ability and, hence, on language proficiency. It certainly led, in Britain, to the rapid emergence and widespread adoption (not always with secure foundations) of graded objectives or graded levels of achievement approaches. Though functionalism and related approaches such as graded objectives seem to have been taken up somewhat later in the United States with little appearing in the literature there

before the end of the 1970's, significant work on proficiency and its measurement commenced there as early as the 1950's with intermittent work that led eventually to the widespread use of the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) Scale of "Absolute Language Proficiency Ratings" [FSI 1968 and see Clark 1978 for discussions of it]. Recently, this scale has been revised and renamed the Inter-Agency Language Roundtable (or ILR) Scale. More recently again, the concept of proficiency has been related to school and university language programmes, and, drawing on both the FSI or ILR Scale and the Australian Second Language Proficiency Ratings (the ASLPR), the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages has produced the ACTFL Scale. Now the literature coming out of North America is full of proficiency, how to rate it, and how to plan and teach proficiency-based courses.

In Australia, the first major developments of this sort occurred in 1978 when work on new national guidelines for the Adult Migrant Education Program was commenced. It was in this context that Elaine Wylie and the present writer first developed the ASLPR though it has subsequently been applied to other languages, to other age groups, to school foreign language programmes, and, most recently, to special purpose assessment. In 1978, the new Adult Migrant Education Program adopted a proficiency-focussed approach [see Ingram 1979] and, since then, foreign language programmes in all States and Territories have moved to a greater or lesser degree towards a proficiency or "competency" focus in syllabus design and assessment. Perhaps the most determined attempt of this sort and certainly the earliest has been in Queensland where the first such syllabuses were prepared in

1980-81 and are now being revised. It is also undoubtedly relevant that, in Queensland, external examinations for most Secondary School students were abolished fifteen years ago, a system of moderated school-based or internal assessment has been operating since then, and considerable responsibility is placed on teachers to prepare and assess work programmes using syllabuses produced by the Board of Secondary School Studies through a complex system of Advisory and Syllabus Committees consisting of teachers and academics.

One further development of considerable potential importance in Australia is the nationally-funded Australian Language Levels (ALL) Project based in Adelaide and initially directed by the Scottish language teacher, John Clark. The ALL Project started out as an attempt to produce a set of graded levels of achievement specifications or graded objectives for use in Australian Secondary Schools. It has become more ambitious and perhaps less specific than this and now is attempting to produce syllabus guidelines for all languages taught at all levels from Year One to Year Twelve in Australian schools. It is indeed an ambitious project, well structured to involve education systems in all Australian States and Territories, and, in its theoretical developments and practical recommendations, it could have implications for the profession beyond Australia.

This brief sketch of the world scene has been given to show that, in moving in the sorts of directions discussed here, New Zealand is not alone, indeed it would be adopting interesting, innovative but well-established approaches that could, I believe, only

enhance the practical relevance of its foreign language courses and the level of performance of its students. That, at least, has been the experience elsewhere, including in my own home State of Queensland where the sorts of issues now to be discussed have been basic fodder for the syllabus committees for some five years.

III Syllabus Design

III.1 Basic Determinants: Though the ultimate focus of this paper is on attainment-testing, interpreted here to mean competency or proficiency testing, we shall first consider some basic characteristics of language and its learning and then some issues of syllabus design before focussing on testing. This sequence is significant since, if there is one pre-eminent failing with external examinations, it is that they, the tests, come to determine what is taught and so become the syllabus. On the contrary, though tests can be used to inform syllabus design and on-going programme development, how and what you teach must ultimately be determined by the nature of what you teach and how it is learned. In other words, the basic principles of syllabus design, like the principles of language teaching in general, of methodology, and ultimately of testing, derive from three basic determinants: the nature of language, the nature of the language learner (especially how he learns a language), and the nature of the society (especially the learner's relationship to the society). Let us look briefly at some of their principal characteristics [see Ingram 1978, Chapters 4-6, or 1979 for fuller discussion].

In considering the nature of language, let us consider what is meant when we say someone "knows" a language. First, language is rule-based, i.e., a person who knows a language knows the rules (e.g., of syntax or vocabulary) on which it operates and can apply them in carrying out communication tasks. Because language operates on rules, it is, secondly, creative, i.e. the learner does not just repeat memorized utterances but he[a] continually produces and understands new, original ones. This is important to the language teacher since it suggests that one cannot develop language proficiency by having the learners rote-memorize utterances through "pattern drills", dialogues, or even the situational routines into which some graded objectives courses readily degenerate. Rather, the learner must internalize the basic principles on which the language operates and be able to apply them in production or comprehension. Third, language varies from context to context, hence, from register to register, and so, when we say someone knows a language, we mean that he knows how to communicate in certain situations. Fourth, it is not enough to know rules and vocabulary, but the person who knows a language uses the rules to carry out communication tasks, i.e., the learner must learn to mobilize the rules and vocabulary to carry out those "language functions" that occur in the situations in which he uses the language. Finally, if someone knows a language, he does not produce and understand just isolated sentences but he is able to tie sentences together, to link them into texts, and to relate them to the context, i.e., he knows the principles of discourse and cohesion and the features (such as pronouns, conjunctions, and inter-sentence connectives like "however", "nevertheless" or "the following") that link sentences

together and relate them to the linguistic and extra-linguistic contexts.

The problem for the syllabus designer is to identify the linguistic components that the learner has to know in order to be able to use the language. Two factors, in particular, determine this: first, the situations in which the learners need to operate and, second, the need to develop the language systematically so that, in order to meet their needs, learners do not just reproduce memorized utterances but use the language creatively, as they do their first language.

The second basic determinant of language teaching, viz. the nature of the learner and especially of how he learns the language influences the way in which the language content is presented and scheduled. It is not possible in this paper to discuss fully the "language learning strategies" that emerge as one peruses the literature on developmental psycholinguistics [but see Ingram 1978, Chapter 4; 1979]. However, they lead to principles of methodology that, in brief, can be summarized as:

1. The learner must be actively and purposefully involved at all times.

2. The learner must have freedom to learn naturally and in his own way while being given any formal support he needs.

3. The learner must interact as frequently and naturally as possible with speakers of the language.

4. Language learning occurs in order to satisfy the learner's needs and teaching will be most effective if it responds to the learner's felt needs.

The third determinant, the nature of the society and especially the learner's relationship to it, raises many important issues that lie beyond the scope of this paper [for fuller discussion, see Ingram 1978, Chapter 5; 1979]. Suffice it to say that society's need for language skills affects the goals that will be seen by the learner as relevant and, consequently, how the society values language skills affects the learner's motivation. In addition, the structure of a society affects the purposes that language teaching must satisfy; in a multicultural society, for example, where language teaching has important roles to play in culture transmission, in cross-cultural attitude development, and in developing communication skills to link cultural groups, the purposes language teaching must satisfy are different from those in a unilingual society where language teaching might be more concerned with skills for international communication, access to technology, or general education. Again, if individuals in a society are seen as having freedom to direct their own lives or to influence the path that the society will take, then it is more likely that educational methods will seek to have the learner use and develop his own language learning capacities, to try to satisfy his own felt needs, and to direct his own learning activities.

The problem for the syllabus designer is to take account of these basic determinants, to identify what has to go into the course, to organize it for teaching purposes, and to indicate in broad terms the teaching and assessment approaches to be adopted.

III.2 Identifying Language Content: Whatever the nature of the course,

if it is to systematically develop the learner's language skills, it must be coherent and integrated. The first and most fundamental need is to clearly establish the course's goals and objectives. The goals are the long-term or overall aims of the course: whatever else they might envisage, they must include precise statements of the nature (e.g., general or "special purpose") and level of proficiency sought. There is no place for such "motherhood" statements as "to develop the ability to converse freely with native speakers" but they should state the desired proficiency goal as, for example, S:1+, L:2, W:1+, R:2 on the ASLPR, which, in turn, is translatable into actual behavioural descriptions or, in "graded objectives" courses, into the range of situations (and their requisite linguistic forms) in which the learners are minimally to be able to use the language.

The objectives are the on-going aims the teacher adopts as he or she selects language content to teach and activities for the learners to participate in. The objectives are short-term aims, especially immediate formal learning aims, which, if viewed impartially, are not so much components of language behaviour that are being developed as intensive and systematized experience that is being given to the learners. Thus, for instance, the teacher may choose to present the present continuous tense with performance objectives such that, by the end of the lesson, the learners will be able to say such utterances as He is closing the door or I am reading a book. However, Krashen's distinction between learning and acquisition makes it clear that, unless the learner is "ready" to acquire that verb form, he is unlikely to use that form in a natural situation outside the formal classroom except where he can consciously "monitor" his language [see, for

example, Krashen 1976]. The teacher, in other words, may quite correctly have identified the present continuous tense and its formal learning as an objective but its teaching has, in reality, been a means of providing the learner with concentrated and systematized language experience that may help his natural learning strategies move him towards the course's specified proficiency goal.

Language occurs in situations, it is used in situations, and a learner's realization of need comes from experience in situations. Consequently, the starting-point in planning a course and relating goals to language content is to identify the situations in which the language is to be used (see Table 1 and Fig. 1). More precisely, one must first ask in what contexts or settings the learner needs to be able to use the language. So, for example, a new arrival in a country (whether a migrant, a tourist, or a student) may need to use the language in a shop, in a doctor's surgery, in a post office, at a bus stop, and so on. A science graduate may need to use the language in an overseas science laboratory, in a library, or in the staff common room. When a setting has been identified, then one can identify the role the learner will fill in that setting. So, for example, in a shop, a person may fill the role of a customer or a shop assistant; in a doctor's surgery, the role could be that of a patient, the interviewing doctor, or a receptionist. When the settings and the likely roles in them have been identified, then one can identify the purposes for which the language will be used in the settings and so the language transactions, language tasks or language events that will take place and, therefore, the language functions that the learner will need to be able to carry

out and the ideas or notions that he needs to be able to convey. The transaction together with the role and setting constitutes a situation. So, for example, the learner may need to be able to use the language in the situation of enquiring where certain foods are located in a supermarket (setting: supermarket; role: customer; function: enquiring about location; notion: location) (see Table 1 for more examples).

When the situations, functions and notions have been identified, then the syntax and vocabulary or lexis needed to carry them out can also be identified. So, for example, the function of describing symptoms requires such syntax as NP + V + Adv.Time, possessive pronouns, and simple present tense and it requires such lexis as parts of the body, "hurt" and time expressions (e.g., "My arm hurts all the time"). Seeking information at a bus stop about direction of travel requires such syntax as do-questions and lexis such as "go", "past" and names of streets and places (e.g., "Do you go past the post office in Burke Street?").

When one identifies all the settings in which a learner needs to be able to use the language, it is found that they tend to cluster into groups or themes. So, for example, settings such as a doctor's surgery, a dentist's waiting room, a hospital casualty department or an optometrist's studio cluster into a theme of "health". The concept of themes is very important since it provides a way of organizing the multi-various settings in which a learner may need to be able to use the language and, equally important, themes enable one to identify and organize the minimum cultural information a learner needs if he is to be able to

operate in the language. Thus, for example, the theme of "transport" arising from settings such as "at a street corner", "at a bus stop", "at a railway ticket office", and "at an airport check-in desk" suggests cultural information such as how crossing a city street is regularized, what side of the road cars drive on, private and public transport arrangements, road safety provisions, and traffic control. Identifying cultural information in this way is important for several reasons. First, meaning conveyed by language exists only in the context of the culture and, deprived of the culture that is integrated with it, language reduces to a meaningless verbal algebra; second, whereas language teaching traditionally neglected the real, everyday culture in favour of the atypical literary culture, this approach re-emphasizes the general culture; and, third, one needs a way of organizing cultural information and integrating it with the language teaching so that it can be taught systematically and coherently and not become a disjointed list of cultural snippets.

IV Assessment and Measurement of Proficiency

In this paper, the terms "assessment" or "testing" mean the considered judgement that teachers make about student learning or student performance. "Test" refers to any activity used in evaluating or measuring some part or all of a learner's language proficiency or other performance [cf. Ingram 1985]. What tests or test types are used in the process of assessing language learning should depend on the aim of the assessment or testing. Thus, if one's interest is in how well the learner has formally learned the actual content presented during a course, then tests based specifically on that content, i.e., on the syntax,

vocabulary or functions specified in the course content, will be most appropriate. If the aim of the testing is to measure progress in a "graded objectives" course, then the test should focus on the situations, tasks, functions, and their exponents specified in the course content. If, however, the aim is to assess the learner's general proficiency, then a test that gives a picture of the learner's practical language skills in general, everyday situations will be most appropriate. Proficiency rating scales such as the Australian Second Language Proficiency Ratings have been developed and seem most suitable for this purpose, i.e., to measure general proficiency. Proficiency is the ability to carry out language tasks. In the ASLPR and other rating scales, proficiency levels are defined by describing the sorts of language tasks learners can carry out and how they are carried out in terms of such features as sentence forms, vocabulary range, formal accuracy, pronunciation, fluency, comprehensibility, rate of utterance, register flexibility, and so on. In using rating scales to measure proficiency, one essentially asks what tasks the learners can carry out, how they carry them out, and, most of all, what the nature of the language behaviour observed is as the learners try to communicate and what behavioural description on the scale best matches the observed behaviour. Whereas rating scales designed to measure general proficiency describe the tasks and how they are carried out in general terms, in terms of an overall picture of the language behaviour observable at each level as learners attempt to use the language to carry out the tasks, in the graded objectives approach, the actual tasks and the actual exponents by which they are carried out are generally specified in the syllabus.

One important advantage of rating scales such as the ASLPR over other tests is that they are developmental in structure, i.e., the progression of behavioural descriptions attempts to reflect the way in which a second language develops from zero to native-like. Thus the scale is not arbitrary but related to some notion of the universal developmental schedule and a learner's rating indicates the stage of development he has reached in the developmental schedule. This is important for at least three reasons. First, the proficiency measurements provided are not arbitrary in the sense that a percentage or a score such as 4 on a 7-point scale or 495 out of a possible 650 is arbitrary and meaningless but, in that they are behavioural and task-oriented, they tell the user exactly what the learner is capable of doing and, in that they relate to the developmental schedule, the behaviour specified exists within a progressive, developmental sequence of behaviours. Second, through the developmental schedule, there are changes in all aspects of language behaviour (syntax, vocabulary, discourse, functions, and so on) but nevertheless certain aspects of language behaviour and hence different parameters of change become salient at different developmental stages. This is important not least because the key parameters of change help the rater to identify where the learner's proficiency falls on the scale. Third, because rating scales such as the ASLPR are behavioural and developmental, they indicate to the syllabus writer what learners at different levels can do, what their future directions of development are, and, therefore, what is most relevant to include in their course in order to maximize their rate of development.

So far reference has been made to the measurement of proficiency and it has been suggested that a direct test such as a rating scale is particularly effective for this purpose. However, there are many purposes for which one tests and many test types: what test is most appropriate depends on the purpose of the testing. Let us now consider briefly the sorts of tests available and what they might contribute to syllabus design.

There are two broad approaches to test development that can be identified [see Ingram 1985]: first, the non-developmental approach, which views language proficiency more or less statically as facility in handling certain language content (a linguistic perspective), and, second, a developmental approach.

Non-developmental tests may select the content to be tested in an ad hoc manner, on a linguistic basis, or on a behavioural basis. Ad hoc tests use items and techniques chosen largely on the intuitions and experience of the examiner and whether or not they work. Many discrete-point tests fall into this category, e.g., CELT and TOEFL, as do most public examinations. Non-developmental tests prepared on a linguistic basis set out from a concept of the nature of language or the relevant domain of the language which they seek to sample or within which they seek to assess the learner's ability to operate. Some tests use frequency counts of lexical or structural items to facilitate sampling, others sample randomly (e.g. cloze or dictation), while others use contrastive linguistics to identify "difficulties" or points of interference. Behaviourally-based non-developmental tests identify a particular language behaviour or aspect of language behaviour to be tested. This might include particular

functions, tasks in specified situations (as in "graded objectives" approaches), or the language skills needed for some activity (e.g., an academic course).

Developmentally-based tests derive their justification from the psycholinguistic evidence that language development (whether first or second language) is not random but systematic with all learners seeming to progress through the same stages. Thus, developmentally-based tests seek to relate a learner's proficiency to the stage of development he has reached in the developmental schedule. Thus, the ASLPR describes learners' language behaviour in terms of the sorts of tasks they can carry out and how they carry them out as their proficiency develops from zero to native-like.

These two broad approaches to developing tests lead to different types of test which are commonly categorized into indirect, semi-direct, and direct tests. Viewed as devices to measure proficiency, indirect tests essentially test one thing, e.g. syntactic knowledge, and try to say something about something else, viz. proficiency. This is done, usually, by psychometric, norm-referencing procedures in which the results, distributed desirably over a normal curve, are categorized in some way into proficiency levels. Typical of indirect tests are discrete-point tests in which language knowledge and language behaviour are analysed into the smallest possible units and knowledge of or ability to use these units is assessed.

Whereas discrete-point tests are analytic and isolate language items, in real-life, language items operate together supporting each other in meaning and dependent on each other structurally

and part of the skill of language use involves being able to put all the items together and to comprehend them when received together. Consequently, semi-direct tests (also called integrative tests), such as cloze or dictation, have sought to integrate the language components into a total event and to test knowledge of them or ability to use them in that total event. Though such tests resemble indirect tests in that they sometimes seem to be testing discrete items and the scores are processed psychometrically similarly to the scores on indirect tests, nevertheless, the fact that a total language event is used puts these tests closer to real language performance or the demonstration of real language proficiency - hence the term "semi-direct". Direct tests (which are also "integrative") focus on actual language behaviour, are typified by rating scales discussed earlier, and provide the most readily interpretable statements of learners' language proficiency.

Having observed, even if cursorily, the different types of tests, let us now consider the different information that the different types provide to the syllabus designer and to the teacher.

V Assessment in Syllabus Design

V.1 Identifying Language Content: Indirect, especially discrete-point, tests can provide specific information on the items of knowledge or skill that contribute to or are missing from the learner's interlanguage. Thus, for example, a test such as the following shows whether the learner knows and can apply the rule that you use the conjunction than after a comparative:

Example 1: Tick the item that best fills the gap.

Question: "How old is Joe?"
"He's two years older____his sister Mary."

Answer: that [ ] as [ ] than [ ] of [ ]

This test will not, however, clearly distinguish whether the rule is in the learner's conscious, learned knowledge and so only available for use when he has time to monitor or whether it is in his acquired knowledge and available for use in real-life situations. This, incidentally, accounts for the fact that indirect tests correlate at a relatively low and unstable level with direct tests of practical proficiency when the former are used with foreign language laerners who, unlike second language learners, have had little opportunity to apply their knowledge in real-life, practical communication [see Ingram 1982, 1982a]. From a syllabus design or programme planning point of view, tests of this sort most effectively provide diagnostic information on the specific items of syntax, pronunciation, vocabulary, discourse, or functions that the learner does or does not know and which, if not known, the teacher may wish to include at some point in the course. In that such tests are based on specific items within the multitude of items that make up a language, there is a problem of sampling to ensure the syllabus designer or programme planner obtains adequate information.

Semi-direct tests are sometimes claimed to go part of the way towards solving this sampling problem because, if properly constructed, they are said to randomly sample the language or the

domain of interest and they test the learner's ability to handle the items integratively within normal language functioning. However, the test would need to be very long for one to be confident that the language or even one domain in it had been adequately sampled. Nevertheless, a cloze may provide some indication of areas of need requiring closer investigation and, for programme planning purposes, random cloze could well be supported by selective cloze focussing on particular features. It is particularly useful as a means of identifying how the learner processes language, e.g. on a word-by-word basis, using an immediate context, or using the total context, and so it can effectively diagnose the learner's facility in using the cohesive and discourse features and indicate the relevance of these features and the related linguistic processing for the syllabus or programme being developed [see Ingram 1982a].

"White noise" and interlinear tests can be used similarly to cloze though the white noise test allows one to focus on ability in listening. Dictation may be used similarly if presented as Oller proposes [1979: Chapter 10] so as the dictated chunks exceed immediate memory capacity and introduce a productive or creative element into the test. Delivered more slowly and in smaller chunks, it may be used to identify phonological needs and, in writing, sound-symbol correspondence or spelling needs. In addition, Brindley and Singh [1982] base their testing procedures on the assumption that a syntactically detailed universal developmental schedule has been identified and use dictation incorporating specific syntactic items to provide detailed information on syntactic needs and, incorrectly, I believe, to make a statement about the learner's proficiency.

Direct tests such as the ASLPR, based on an overview of language proficiency development, contribute in at least three ways to syllabus design or programme development. First, in that certain major parameters of change emerge at different stages in the scale, the learners' location at any particular point on the scale indicates the development trends that are dominant for them and that a course should attempt to encourage. Second, used together with a checklist of phonological, syntactic, discourse and other items, direct tests may also be used to identify specific items of need in the learner's language though it requires skilled interviewing to ensure that the learner's interlanguage is adequately sampled. Third, we noted earlier how rating scales enable the precise statement of goals in behavioural, i.e. proficiency, terms.

V.2 Formative and Summative Assessment: The contrast made earlier between goals and objectives implies a difference (in nature, test types and feedback) between the assessment of general proficiency and on-going course achievement (i.e., between summative and formative assessment). If goals are specified in terms of general proficiency, then direct instruments such as the ASLPR that measure general proficiency are most appropriate and should be used at exit-points (i.e., for summative purposes). However, if the course aims are not the development of general proficiency but something else (e.g., to develop knowledge about the language, literary appreciation, or translation skills), then different tests will be required (e.g., a discrete-point test, literary exegesis, or translation) and the feedback into the course will be different. It may also be that, in considering course attainment, one wants to know to what extent the learner

has internalized the content of the course and, if so, then tests directly related to that content may be most appropriate. For example, if one wants to know whether the specified grammatical content has been mastered, then discrete-point tests of the grammar taught may give the most direct information. A functional or language task checklist as used in the Lothian progress cards and Waystage Tests may be used to assess achievement in the skills aspects of the course [see Clark 1982 and 1982a].

At intermediate points in a course, it is probably not appropriate to use the ASLPR or another test of general proficiency because general proficiency changes too slowly (especially in unintensive Secondary School foreign language programmes) for valid and reliable measurements of general proficiency to show much change or for useful information to be fed into on-going course development. At intermediate points, teachers are probably most interested in formative testing, in particular in order to assess what of their formal teaching is being learned and, possibly, acquired. What test will be most appropriate for this purpose will depend on what information the teacher wants to find out, especially in order to feed back into the programme planning: if the teacher's interest is in whether or not the learner is internalizing the grammar that is being taught, then test items that focus specifically on the grammatical rules will be most appropriate (e.g., discrete-point tests, selective cloze or selective dictation); if interest is on functions, then a role play approach or even an item such as "Tell me what you would say in a post office to ask the cost of sending a letter to New Zealand" might be used though it should

be contextualized in a realistic situation with a contextual purpose for the transaction to occur as the Lothian progress cards and Waystage Tests do [see Clark 1982 and 1982a].

This distinction between formative and summative assessment and between goals and how the proficiency goals are attained puts into clearer perspective continuous assessment, which is sometimes seen as the alternative to external public examinations. Clearly, in a language course, the learners' proficiency in Week 1 is different from their proficiency in Weeks 15 or 50 and if the course goals entail proficiency and if the final assessment is to make a statement about the learners' attainment in terms of that goal, then measures of the learners' proficiency at intermediate points through the course are largely irrelevant and an exit-point assessment of some sort is essential. Whether it should be internal and school-based or external and "Public" depends on other considerations.

V.3 Translating Proficiency Ratings into School Grades: One of the difficulties teachers sometimes have in confronting rating scales is to know how to convert proficiency ratings (which can provide a profile of proficiency in all four macroskills, e.g., S:1, L:1+, R:1, W:1-) into the grades traditionally used in Secondary Schools. We have already seen that rating scales provide a ready means of setting goals quite precisely. Thus, one might state that the goal in a three year unintensive French course (Years 8 to 10) is the proficiency S:1-, L:1-, W:1-, R:1- or, in Japanese, S:1-, L:1-, W:0+, R:0+ and these figures are immediately translated in the scale into behavioural descriptions. This approach has several benefits. First, it is more likely to be

honest and realistic. Second, it forces syllabus writers and teachers to think more clearly and realistically about appropriate course content and learning activities. Third, if the goals seem modest yet realistic in terms of what firm data is available on learning rates [e.g., FSI 1973], then this approach also forces policy-makers, education administrators, and curriculum planners to realize the effect on language teaching and learning of the time allocated to language classes. Fourth, goals identified in this way continually remind teachers of the essential differences referred to earlier between formal learning and acquisition, between goals and objectives, and between the proficiency levels to be attained in the course and the content the teacher needs to present and have the learner practise as the data input to the learner's natural acquisition processes [cf. Ingram 1982; Sections III.1 and III.2]. Finally, this approach readily enables proficiency statements to be converted into whatever grades (e.g., words, numbers, or letters) an education system chooses to use. Thus, if goals are speciified in terms of the proficiency levels the average student could be expected to achieve, then achievement above or below this leads to higher or lower grades. For example, the present writer's recommendations to the Queensland Board of Secondary School Studies on the conversion of goals and proficiency levels to Board grades in the unintensive Queensland Secondary School French courses were as in Tables 2 and 3.

V.4 Tests as Syllabuses: Though proficiency descriptions and rating scales can be used to specify goals in a language course, neither they nor any tests should be used as syllabuses. This is the great danger in education systems that climax in important

examinations using an inflexible test format. Ends and means are not the same: the proficiency goal sought is not the same as the developmental path that leads towards that goal and the factors that determine the nature of a test or even how you describe a proficiency level are not the same as the factors that determine how a language is learned. While the ASLPR, for example, can appropriately be used to specify proficiency goals, neither its descriptions nor its examples should be seen as constituting a syllabus, i.e. the examples of tasks that can occur at S:2, L:2, R:2, W:2 cannot be practised or rote-memorized as a means of providing the learner with that level of proficiency, not least because the creativity that underlies proficiency at all but the lowest levels cannot come from rote-memorizing task examples of a proficiency level, as the failure of the worst types of graded objectives courses and the earlier "conversation"-based courses demonstrates.

V.5 Graded Objectives: The chief difference between a rating scale such as the ASLPR used to measure general proficiency and a set of graded objectives is that the former claims to be universally applicable within a concept of general proficiency, the non-specialist register, or everyday situations. Graded objectives constrict the proficiency sought to the ability to carry out specified tasks, in specified situations, generally using specified exponents or language items. The two concepts can be in conflict if graded objectives are defined narrowly (as is their inherent risk) with the result that the objectives are achieved through the rote-memorization of set phrases to carry out the specified tasks. In such an approach, students are tested by seeing whether they can repeat the set utterances in

the specified situations. Rating scales designed to measure general proficiency are inappropriate to this approach because the notion of general proficiency and its development entail the hierarchical development of utterances and the natural (hence creative and not rote-memorized) use of language.

However, the concepts of general proficiency and graded objectives (especially in Clark's sense of "graded levels of achievement"[e.g., Clark 1982, 1982a]) are not necessarily in conflict provided the graded levels of achievement have been designed to lead ultimately to the development of general proficiency. In fact, the ASLPR recognizes that formulaic (hence rote-memorized) utterances are common at the 0+ level and even up to 1- and, to this extent, graded objectives even in the narrow sense may be relevant to the lowest proficiency levels. From 1-, one expects to see more flexibility or creativity starting to emerge and, beyond this level, learners must be able to use creatively whatever language resources they have, i.e. to produce and understand original utterances. Graded levels of achievement courses beyond this level can be compatible with general proficiency but, to be so, the situations and the tasks in which the language is to be taught and assessed are more clearly specified than in "general proficiency" courses, the situations, tasks and language exponents should be so selected that the learner's developmental needs are taken into account, and the language should be so experienced and practised that creativity is fostered, i.e., the learner is creating language in response to situations, purposes and meanings and not just repeating rote-memorized utterances. So designed, graded objectives courses lead to general proficiency and, in them, both tests of

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general proficiency (hence, rating scales such as the ASLPR) and the more specific content-oriented tests (e.g., discrete-point tests focussing on syntax, functions etc.) are relevant.

VI Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show how the concept of proficiency can be accommodated in both syllabus design and assessment. It tried to present a rational approach to syllabus design in which the starting-point is the learners' real needs, the setting of realistic goals in the light of those needs, and the identification of language content that will satisfy the needs and also lead to the development of the desired proficiency levels. The paper surveyed the major test types and tried to demonstrate that there is no single answer to the question "how to test" but rather different test types serve different purposes. If, however, one wants to adopt the development of practical proficiency as one of the aims of the course, then one must select assessment procedures and test types that enable one to measure practical proficiency. At the present stage of knowledge in applied linguistics, direct tests, i.e., proficiency rating scales, provide the most valid and reliable means of measuring practical proficiency and they make a valuable contribution to syllabus design.

Footnote

1. In this paper, it is necessary to distinguish a "syllabus" or "course" (which is time-free) from a "programme" (which is sequential and time-governed).

2. Throughout this paper, "he" is to be considered common gender.

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Fig. 1

The Identification of Language Content

(N.B. The starting-point is with settings)

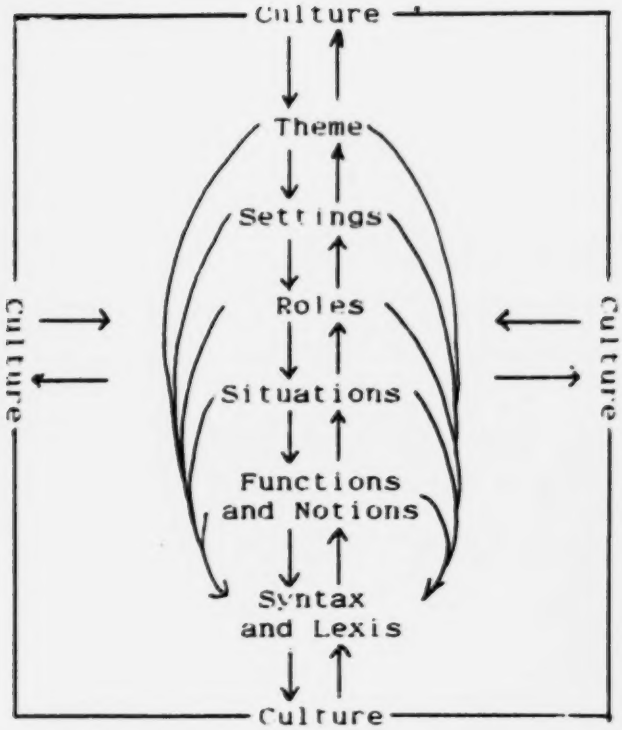

Table 1 Settings, Situations, Roles, Functions and Notions

SETTING	SITUATION	ROLE	FUNCTIONS	NOTIONS
Doctor's Surgery	Being interviewed by a doctor in his surgery	Patient	Describing symptoms, Seeking information about medication, etc.	Pain, Intensity, Frequency, etc.
Post Office	Buying stamps in a post office	Customer	Seeking information about cost, etc.	Price, etc.
Science laboratory in a College or University	Writing up an experiment in a science laboratory	Teaching Assistant	Describing substances, Narrating chemical events etc.	Colour, Texture, etc.
Staff common-room in a College or University	Conversing in a staff common-room	Staff Member	Greetings, Entering a conversation, etc.	Courtesy, etc.

(Note that, if a table such as this is to be used as a basis for course design, the following additional columns should be added: Syntax, Lexis, Non-Verbals, Other Linguistic Features, Cultural Knowledge).

Table 3. Conversion of Proficiency Ratings to Board Grades, Year 12

YEAR 12					
GRADES	PROFICIENCY				
	S	L	R	W	OVERALL
Very High Achievement	>2	>2	>2	>2	All four macroskills >2
High Achievement	2	2	2	2	Two or more macroskills 2, others 1+
Sound Achievement	1+	1+	1+	1+	All four macroskills 1+
Low Achievement	1	1	1	1	One or more macroskill 1
Very Low Achievement	<1	<1	<1	<1	Two or more macroskills <1
					NOTE: Any variation below the number of macroskills at a specified level of achievement would have to be compensated for by an equal number above for the learner to be graded at that level of achievement.

Table 2. Conversion of Proficiency Ratings to Board Grades, Year 10

YEAR 10					
GRADES	PROFICIENCY				
	S	L	R	W	OVERALL
Very High Achievement	>1	>1	>1	>1	All four macroskills >1
High Achievement	1	1	1	1	Two or more macroskills 1, others 1-
Sound Achievement	1-	1-	1-	1-	All four macroskills 1-
Very Low Achievement	0+	0+	0+	0+	1 or more macroskills 0+
Low Achievement	<0+	<0+	<0+	<0+	Two or more macroskills<0+
					NOTE: Any variation below the number of macroskills at a specified level of achievement would have to be compensated for by an equal number above for the learner to be graded at that level of achievement.